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# Counterterrorism: Strategy and Tactics



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*Following is an address by L. Paul Bremer, III, Ambassador at Large for Counter-Terrorism, before the Committee on Foreign Relations, Tampa, Florida, November 4, 1987.*

It's a pleasure for me to appear before such a distinguished group. You have done much to promote public understanding of the foreign policy issues facing our country, and you are to be commended for your efforts.

A recent Roper poll asked Americans to name topics on which they wished the government to take action. Terrorism was named more often than nuclear arms reductions or Middle East peace. It has become the number one foreign policy issue for many Americans.

Clearly, the people are demanding action. And in the finest American tradition, they want action right now. Today I want to describe how our government is responding to the terrorist threat.

## Dealing With Terrorism Is a Long-Term Problem

In spite of the impression that many of us have, terrorism is not something new. Yes, within the past 20 years we have experienced many different kinds of terrorism, and we have seen terrorism live and in color in our living rooms. But terrorism has been around for centuries.

The group whose name gives us our word for assassin arose in Persia about 900 years ago and later flour-

ished in Syria. The Assassins recognized that a tiny group of men prepared to die during their attack could paralyze a larger foe and that the fear of such attacks could give them power beyond their size.

During the Napoleonic wars, partisan forces pushed carts laden with explosives into the ranks of soldiers, causing significant damage. By the late 19th century, the telegraph, newspapers, and rising literacy led Russian anarchists to recognize the shock value of violence. They referred to their terrorist attacks as "propaganda by the deed."

Given the persistence of terrorism over centuries, it is unreasonable to think we can eliminate it. But we can, and must, take vigorous action to limit terrorism. And the signs are that, after an initial period of uncertainty, the West is finally getting its antiterrorist act together.

## 1970s: On the Defensive

When modern terrorism burst on the scene 20 years ago, the international community, especially in the United Nations, reacted in a befuddled fashion. The West lacked a strategy and was on the defensive against both domestic and international terrorism.

There are a number of reasons for this passivity.

- Many of the world's nations had recently emerged from colonialism; in some cases, they considered terrorists

as fellow revolutionaries who would soon join them in the community of nations.

- The Vietnam war increased anti-American sentiment around the world and led to an intellectual environment in which anti-U.S. activism was easier to justify.

- In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the prevailing political and intellectual climate in many Western countries promoted an extraordinary tolerance of violent political action. This allowed terrorists to demand and receive public attention not just for their acts but for their "causes." Terrorist acts—including kidnaping, kneecapping, and murder—acquired an aura of romance and adventure.

- In the Middle East, Israel's stunning success in a preemptive strike in response to threats of war by Egypt, Syria, and Jordan altered the perception of Israel as a microstate struggling against the odds. It also shattered the hopes, nourished by some Palestinians, that the front-line Arab states would destroy Israel and, by military force, create a Palestinian state.

- Finally, the tremendous growth in air travel and television in the 1960s gave terrorists increased mobility, more vulnerable targets, and a readymade worldwide audience for the acts.

## The West Develops a Counterterrorist Strategy

By the end of the 1970s, the outrage at terrorist acts slowly began to turn the tide of opinion in the West. In-



creasingly, people realized that nothing justified what they were seeing.

Perhaps more than anything, the ever-expanding circle of targets for terrorist attack brought about change. People and governments began to realize that terrorists could and would attack anyone, including erstwhile sympathizers. Here in America, the taking of our Tehran embassy catalyzed public opinion and led to demands for effective government action.

As a result of these changes, the West began to develop a clear, overall strategy to deal with terrorism and the supporting tactics necessary to implement that strategy. Action on two levels was needed: the development of political will to counter terrorism and the allocation of more resources to the fight.

### **Political Vision and Political Will**

We must avoid the temptation of taking the total elimination of terrorism as our goal. We can no more eradicate terrorism than we can eradicate crime.

The West's strategic objective must be to reduce terrorism to a level at which it no longer dominates world policy. We can achieve this objective with a firm, concerted counterterrorism effort sustained over 5-7 years. How? By making the general political, economic, and psychological climate in which terrorists operate more hostile. The targets of any counterterrorist measure, therefore, are not particular terrorists or groups but the community of nations and the overall political environment.

The key element in developing a counterterrorist strategy is the development of political vision and the political will to carry out the fight. And to nurture the development of political will, the West had to change the whole dynamic of the international discussion of terrorism. We had to get away from the defensive, muddled reaction to terrorist violence of the early 1970s and reassert, clearly and decisively, democracy's willingness to fight terrorism. We had to shift the public debate on terrorism from understanding "root causes" to condemning the crimes terrorists commit.

### **Specific Measures**

The West has adopted a number of specific measures to pursue our strategic objective. For example, until recently, the international political environment made it relatively easy for terror-supporting states like Libya, Syria, and

Iran to operate against the West. A major element of our counterterrorism policy, therefore, is to put pressure on states that support terrorism. If the West can make it clear that supporting terrorists is unacceptable international behavior, then terrorists will be denied important financial, military, and other support from state supporters.

Another important measure we have developed in our overall strategy is applying the rule of law to terrorists. Terrorists are criminals. They commit criminal actions like murder, kidnaping, and arson, and countries have laws to punish criminals. So a major element of our strategy has been to delegitimize terrorists, to get society to see them for what they are—criminals—and to use democracy's most potent tool, the rule of law, against them.

A third measure is expanded international discussion of terrorism. The United States has made terrorism an important issue in our overall bilateral relations, including with the Soviet Union, and in multilateral forums like the United Nations. By repeatedly pressing the issue with non-Western nations, we seek a truly global front against terrorism.

### **Counterterrorist Measures Succeeding**

These counterterrorist measures are beginning to succeed. In a major show of collective political will last year, the nations of Western Europe took a series of concerted actions to close down Libya's terrorist infrastructure of embassies, "businessmen," and "students." These actions, combined with the U.S. military strike against terrorist facilities in Libya, led to a decline in Libyan-supported terrorism. Indeed, we have detected Libyan involvement in only five terrorist incidents in 1987. Qadhafi no longer openly brags about his use of terrorism. Most important, the political environment was shifted. The Europeans at long last had taken decisive action against a terrorist state. That was a major breakthrough in the development of a Western counterterrorist strategy.

In a similar way, last November, we and the European Community (EC) imposed sanctions on Syria after Syrian officials were proven to have supported specific terrorist operations. These steps were possible only because the countries of Europe had set the pattern of responding to state terrorism with their earlier measures against Libya.

Again, the political environment had shifted. Again, we had success. Syria in June expelled Abu Nidal, a notorious Palestinian terrorist.

As a result of concerted Western pressures, terrorists are finding it harder to get refuge and overt support. The Abu Nidal Organization was expelled from Iraq in 1983 and from Syria in 1987. In Eastern Europe, efforts have been made to disrupt a network of enterprises of the Abu Nidal Organization. Newspaper stories about the terrorist links of a Syrian family named Qassar, notorious for arms trafficking with terrorists, have led to action against them by several European countries in 1987, notably in Spain where they maintained a political headquarters in Marbella.

Moreover, during the past decade, the West has elaborated an international legal structure grounded in bilateral and multilateral agreements to extradite or prosecute terrorists for their crimes. The first steps in an international legal framework were taken in the early 1970s with the Hague convention on airline hijacking. Since then, further agreements have been reached in Montreal and at summit meetings of the seven leading industrialized nations in Tokyo, Bonn, and Venice.

In spite of Lenin's insistence that the revolutionary must never abandon terrorism, the Soviet Union now says that it opposes "all terrorism." While the Soviet definition of terrorism can be convoluted from our point of view, they have specifically condemned some recent acts of terrorism, including the Pan American Flight 073 takeover in Karachi and a grenade attack last year on Israeli soldiers near the Western Wall in Jerusalem. And the Soviets have played a helpful role in drafting new counterterrorist conventions on maritime and airport safety.

Finally, where earlier attempts to cope with terrorism in the United Nations deteriorated into endless apologies for terrorists, in 1985 and 1986 the United Nations passed important resolutions condemning terrorism and hostage-taking.

So we have made a real start this decade in changing the overall environment in which the terrorists must act. Responsible countries have joined a new consensus against terror and have taken concrete steps.

No one of these measures by itself will solve the problem or reduce terrorism to a tolerable level. However, these and other measures, relentlessly pursued over time, will achieve our strategic objective.



## Development of Tactics: More Resources

Just as the West had to fortify its collective political will before it could develop a coherent counterterrorist strategy, so it had to dedicate greatly increased resources to antiterrorism before our tactics could succeed. The strategy demands will; the tactics demand money.

Our tactical objective is to confound and thwart terrorists—to reduce their options and make their operations more complicated and perilous.

For the most part, antiterrorist tactics are measures that better protect the most likely targets from terrorist attacks. How do they work? In much the same way as you protect your home from burglars. Putting heavy dead-bolt locks on your doors, a bar on sliding glass doors, and keeping a dog or installing a burglar alarm will not stop a truly professional thief willing to run substantial risks. But each of them reduces the likelihood of a break-in at your home. Taken together, they can achieve your purpose—protecting your property, lowering your insurance rates, and increasing your peace of mind.

In contrast to counterterrorist measures, antiterrorist steps are largely defensive in nature and can be unilateral or taken in concert with others. The difference, if I may extend my analogy, is between stronger locks and an aggressive policy of pursuing and jailing burglars.

## More Resources Contribute to Success

One of the most important developments in the 1980s has been the public outrage throughout the world with terrorist violence. This strong public reaction has pressured politicians to make more money available to the antiterrorist fight here and abroad. These new resources form the hard core of our revitalized antiterrorist tactics.

Not surprisingly, the police and intelligence agencies first dedicated these new resources to the fight against domestic terrorists. So not surprisingly, the first successes of antiterrorist measures were seen at home. In Italy, anger at the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro led to actions which shattered the old Red Brigades. In Germany, the Baader-Meinhof gang was broken through aggressive intelligence collection and vigorous law enforcement. The same has happened in

French efforts to counter *Action Directe* and in Belgium with the Fighting Communist Cells. Just 2 weeks ago, Spanish and French officials, acting together, dealt an important blow to the Spanish terrorist group ETA [Basque Fatherland and Freedom].

As nations developed better tactics for dealing with their homegrown terrorists, they have recently turned their attention to international cooperation. For example, the countries of the European Community have established the so-called Trevi Group made up of ministers of justice and interior. The Trevi Group has considerably expanded police and intelligence cooperation among the 12 EC members. For example, the ministers now regularly produce an agreed assessment of the terrorist threat facing the EC countries. And they have developed a mechanism to exchange specific information on the movements and operating methods of terrorists. INTERPOL [International Criminal Police Organization], which had resisted dealing with terrorism because of its political overtones, finally began coordinating information on terrorism in 1985 at U.S. request. Our FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], for instance, can now notify the INTERPOL secretariat of arrest warrants we have out on terrorists. INTERPOL then sends the names by alert to all of its member countries.

Specific antiterrorist measures developed by the West include:

- Near universal screening of all airline passengers for metallic objects, so that terrorists can no longer stroll aboard a flight with a pistol or bomb in their pockets;
- Tighter security at diplomatic installations so that an attack on an embassy is likely to require the attackers to absorb casualties, thereby making an attack less likely;
- "Watch lists" of terrorists for border police to stop terrorists entering countries; and
- Measures to sow dissension within terrorist groups through black and gray covert operations.

## Tactical Measures Succeeding

As we have had success in developing and implementing a counterterrorist strategy, now our tactical measures are showing signs of working.

Take, for example, the question of air travel. Over the past 15 years, the international community has developed an extensive set of antiterrorist, defensive measures to protect air travelers. Before these steps, there were 18–20 hijackings each year, with substantial casualties and damage. Last year, there were only two hijackings—the fewest since we started recording figures 20 years ago. Similarly, there has been a significant decline in terrorist attacks on our diplomatic establishments.

The "watch lists" we have developed are in the hands of border police in many countries. Border police are becoming much more attentive to suspicious travelers, too. As a result, terrorists run considerable risks crossing international borders. In January, two Lebanese terrorists were arrested on successive days trying to smuggle explosives into Italy and Germany.

Finally, because of increased attention to antiterrorism by Western governments, terrorist groups can no longer be sure they have not been penetrated by Western intelligence agencies.

And as countries dedicate more resources to the fight against terrorism, they are catching and prosecuting increasing numbers of international terrorists.

- In London, Nezar Hindawi received a life sentence for his attempt to blow up an El Al plane.
- In Paris, Georges Ibrahim Abdallah received a life sentence for his role in the murders of a U.S. Army attache and an Israeli diplomat.
- In Germany, a Lebanese terrorist named Hamadei faces air piracy and murder charges for his role in the TWA 847 hijacking.
- In New York City, Mohammed Atta, an Abu Nidal terrorist, awaits extradition to Israel to face murder charges arising from fire bombing and machinegunning of a bus.
- In Washington, D.C., a Lebanese terrorist named Fawaz Younis awaits trial on hostage-taking charges arising from the hijacking of Jordanian Airlines Flight 401 in June 1985.
- Just 2 weeks ago in Madrid, a Palestinian terrorist was sentenced to 47 years in prison for directing the June 1986 bombing attempt against an El Al airliner.

As with the strategic steps mentioned earlier, no single tactical measure, or even group of measures, will

solve the problem. But the cumulative effect of the measures helps achieve our strategic purpose.

### Conclusion

Terrorism has by no means disappeared from the world scene. It is an ancient problem that will be with us for the foreseeable future as terrorists constantly revise and adapt their methods of attack.

However, newspaper headlines about spectacular terrorist attacks are gradually being replaced by brief press reports on terrorist trials. This is attributable to the important gains the West has made in recent years. We have developed a coherent strategy to reduce terrorism. With a fortified political will, we are changing the overall political environment, making it less benign to terrorism. We have succeeded in pressuring states that sponsor it, and we have strengthened the legal framework for punishing terrorists. We have also developed effective tactical measures to supplement our overall strategy, such as tightening security at obvious targets.

Our counterterrorism policy is showing signs of success. If it is pursued over time, I am confident we can usher in an era when international terrorism is no longer a dominant subject on the international agenda. ■

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